

She spread lean hands, as though offering something. "My name is Nadia Amin. I'm a National Treasure because I'm a LAOM dancer. The only one. I'm here in Atlanta because I'm helping Kyoto-TEC with their latest ad campaign. And when I'm not filming the commercials I'm working with a research team to figure out why I'm the only one who can do it."

"Do what?"

"The dance." She was impatient, but I didn't understand a word.

"Look," I said, "I'm a communication systems major. I don't know anything about larm dancing. Is that like ballet?"

Her hands curled, like claws. "L.A.O.M.," she said, "Light Activated Orchestral Machines. I dance them." She must have seen my bewilderment. "They work by laser. I arrange them on a stage, dance through the beams of light, activating them to make music."

That sounded interesting. "Like those musician robot computers from Taiwan?"

"No. These are actual musical instruments. They're not pre-programmed."

I'd worked with light before, semester before last. It's tricky stuff. Every flicker of movement alters the parameters. "That's impossible."

Her smile was a slow slide of lips back from teeth. "Not for me. But as I said, I'm the only one."

That smile made me nervous. "You said you were a National Treasure. I didn't know they could apply that to people."

"They couldn't. Until now. I was a, ah, guest of the state, but Kyoto-TEC got wind of what I could do and hired some very good lawyers. They argued I was unique, and valuable, a national resource to whom normal rules should not apply." Again, that slow slide of lips. "Maybe they bribed the judge. Anyway, she agreed to bind me over to Kyoto-TEC. So here I am."

"Yes," I said, cautiously, not knowing where that was, exactly.

"They've got a lot of money invested in me. And I'm unique. They do everything for me, give me anything I ask for."

She had no responsibilities. Like a child. I couldn't really imagine how it might be to live like that. "Is that what the guards are for, then? To make sure you stay safe?"

Her laugh clattered around the cold shiny spaces of the bathroom like a thrown knife, and I remembered she was a dancer, and dancers are very strong. She took hold of my arm. "You really shouldn't trust me," she said softly, then walked out into the dark and slam of the bar.

I stayed to wash my face and try understand what the hell was going on.

When I got back out, she was gone. So were the two women by the pool table.

My apartment is five flights up. At night, when I'm tired, they're hell to climb, and I swear I'll look for a first-floor apartment in the morning. But in the mornings I always relent: I'd taken the room because of the view. There's nothing like watching dawn come up over Piedmont Park, turning the trees to peach and orange and gold. Not that I'm often awake at that time in the morning.

Monday morning I was: Nadia was sitting at the

end of my bed. She held out a laserdisk, between two fingers.

"I thought you might like to watch me dance."

"Christ..." I levered myself onto my elbow. She was still there; it was still dawn.

She smiled. "You look very soft when you're asleep. Very vulnerable."

She was wearing midnight blue, and her lips looked like plums. I waited, fascinated by those lips, too confused to ask questions. She leaned forward, slowly. I couldn't take my eyes off her mouth. She laid the disk on my chest. I clutched it to me, still stupid with sleep. "I don't have a player."

Nadia turned, looked around the bare white walls. She'd probably spent more money getting her hair cut than I had furnishing the whole efficiency. "No TV either."

"Where are your bodyguards, anyway?"

"Everywhere." She stood up, sleepy-lidded, like a cat, rocking my bed, sending my hormone count sky-high. She leaned over me again, and tapped the disk I was still clutching to my chest. "I'll leave that for you."

She slung me a smile over her shoulder as she opened the door and stepped through. The locks clicked shut behind her.

It was only then that I wondered how she'd known where to find me, and how the hell she'd gotten in. *You really shouldn't trust me...*

Two and a half hours later the super banged on my door. "Package for you downstairs."

"I'll get it later."

"Came by special delivery. You gotta sign for it. Guys are waiting."

He sounded like one of those phone sex ads: Call Now, Guys Are Waiting. How could I resist? "I'm coming."

It was an HDTV, with laserdisk player and home entertainment system.

"I can't pay for this!" I said to the three men in overalls.

"Shipping bill says 'pre-paid,' lady. You want it or not?"

It was a Kyoto-TEC shipping bill. Nadia. But how had she done it so fast? And why? I thought about her crazy laugh, and bodyguards with guns.

"Lady..." They were getting impatient.

I nodded. "Follow me."

The screen went from black to white letterbox: an unmoving shot of a white-walled room with bare boards polished by age and countless generations of dancing feet. What looked like seven unfinished metal barrels, each a different girth and height, squatted on the floor in a huge irregular circle. Thick cables ran back from each and disappeared off screen. Nadia was tinkering with the insides of the leftmost barrel; she straightened abruptly, flicked a switch. A red eye glowed on the closed panel. She moved to the next one. The camera remained fixed on the centre of the circle. The red light glowed on the second barrel. She went to the third.

A neat line of print appeared in the lower right corner of the screen: *Day two: initial assessment performance with Kyoto-TEC prototype LAOM's.*

## Fascist Hero-Worship Trilogies, Not! Philip Gladwin

The M62. Leeds city centre. A cottage in Devon with tired yellow walls. A pub in Finsbury Park. The stories in **The Sun Rises Red** edited by Christopher Kenworthy (Barrington, £3.95) are grounded in real life. There is simple prose, specific about everyday settings, producing an almost imperceptible dislocation. It does your heart good to see it.

Yet when I first looked at the book the high visibility of Chris Kenworthy inspired misgivings. He writes the introduction, which is legitimate, but he includes three of his own stories, which is less so. But never mind. "Touching," the opening story, is his, and I find it excellent. Strongly imagined and original images of ordinary life portray a research scientist, Kathy, as she wonders how to lose one lover and take another. This issue is only a small instance of the lack of control she feels in her life, and we realize that this inability is shared by all of us. The elements of science fiction in the story work to underline the fact that while we may exhibit an increasing domination of the external world, the path we must take to gain control of our own inner lives is unknowable, chaotic, governed by unfathomably complex rules, and that "So many lives are sad and out of control."

This story sets the tone for the book, which will not be enjoyed by those among you who demand good cheer, or stories of manoeuvre and determined counter-manoeuve producing upbeat conclusion. Most of the characters are people who struggle to maintain commitment to anything – to life itself in places. The narrator of "The Mainstream" by Nicholas Royle is not a man who makes an impact on the world, and worse, he knows it. Driving south on the M1 overnight he stops at a motorway service station and becomes involved with some people who are not what they first appear to be. Some, less able, writers would have used vampires, random hackings, and fistfuls of gore. Royle has the strength to stay with simple elements: the dark, alienation, and the grotesqueries of ordinary people; and the result is a quite remarkable atmosphere of terror.

"And Some Are Missing" by Joel Lane is about the lack of love in the world. Or rather, how the amount of love is insufficient to provide meaning to human existence. Those among us who are fringe people or who are unfairly victimized – drunks, gay men, the underpaid, the rejected, the suicidal,

those unhappy in love – are preyed upon by strange, shadowy, vampiric creatures; the *antipeople*. Although the prose falters occasionally, there is little plot, and there is certainly no resolution. Lane manages to bring us a real sense of anguish and nameless betrayal.

"The Husband's Stitch" by Andrew Rollinson is a nightmare account of a confinement, detailing how the mundane abuse of woman by man becomes ritualistic. I was present at a birth recently, and I'm pleased to say that it was actually nothing like this. But then, of course, I'm a man. While I liked the story, I'm not so sure I agree with Rollinson's hints that the biological process of birth is intrinsically anti-female. This sort of thing is political correctness sophisticated to the point of redundancy, ignoring the fact that life's just like that.

"The Dead" by Simon Ings and M. John Harrison is run through with the awareness of aging, of the inevitability of death. Elizabeth sees adult life through a child's eyes as a series of mysteries, then grows up into understanding while the adults die. She inhabits a world where winter and summer are gradually becoming indistinguishable, where colour has become washed out, where all animation is gradually fading. Life is too much for the people in this story, whose days are weighed down by the memories of the energies of youth and the lingering presence of the billions of human dead. In the words of Elizabeth's father: "There are a great many dead, they far outnumber the living, we must pay our regards to them. We must accommodate them somehow." This is the most substantial thing I've seen from Simon Ings.

The closing story is "The City Calls Her Home" by Mike O'Driscoll and Chris Kenworthy. A woman arrives in London from Dublin to join her lover, at a time when England is on the brink of war. Bernadette Coghlan is possibly the one character in *The Sun Rises Red* who never questions the control she habitually wields over her life. However, the grime and the coldness of a London gripped by panic force her down all the same. She wanders, lost among the city, slipping quickly and noiselessly below the surface. As the war approaches she witnesses random and increasingly frequent acts of violence, and convincing moments of panic, despair and self destruction. The closing four pages, with their broken narrative and their movement toward meditative calm, are powerful.

This is by no means a perfect anthology. There are plenty of rough edges, and I think that the editor should have been strong enough to reject his own third story, "Movements." Yet it's a truthful book and it is apparent that the stories come from the heart. The

great shame is that, as Kenworthy recognizes in his manifesto of an introduction, because popular taste favours "egomaniacal writers hacking out hero-worship trilogies" it won't be read by nearly as many people as it deserves.

Then again, who can really be sure? Nicholas Royle's first horror anthology sold out its print run, and it is similarly small-press and marginal in feel (by which I mean belonging to the margins of its adopted genre, Horror, rather than meriting small consideration). **Darklands 2** (Egerton Press, £4.99) is the follow up. This is a good-value collection; containing 23 stories, as opposed to just seven in *The Sun Rises Red*, and they are all very readable.

However, it is primarily a book of conventional tales, well told but somehow tired, and too many of the stories struggle to produce effect, with plots and characters existing only as a setting for whichever strong central image or feeling of darkness the writer is pushing. Yet there are a few stories here, usually the ones that do more than set out to produce horror, that are better than that. The first piece that made me take notice was Julie Akhurst's "Recovery," which gives a miracle-worker a compulsion to kill, and produces *despair* rather than horror, being all the more memorable for it. "Clad Bone" by D.F. Lewis is also excellent. An insane rhapsody upon the retreat of hairline, it's short, powerful and very weird.

You can't really write science fiction about rockets any more, and likewise you have to be very careful about using ghosts, psychological or real, in dark fiction. "Cleaning Up" by Peter Crowther is an object lesson on writing a story about a haunting. A madman, hydrophobic, obsessed by deaths – some accidents, some he feels guilt for – spills his consciousness into ours for a time. Gruesome, disturbing, unsettling, and very good.

There are stories here that contain no appearances by the supernatural, or the insane, yet retain their unsettling quality. "Nearly Tomorrow" by Judy Hines is one, with its slight displacement from the conventional which strengthens our distaste until it becomes foreboding. "Foreign Land" by Mike O'Driscoll is another. A man, driven by his (too intense?) love for his sister, suffers until a murder happens. The feel is mainstream rather than genre, but that's a strength, and the conclusion, which springs from the inevitability of established character, is worth ten twists which stem from the mere desire to shock.

There are other good stories – "Under the Pylon" by Graham Joyce is a solid evocation of an unpleasant childhood incident, its tone closer to